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ABSTRACT

Workplace-based educational programs are not new. Recent perceptions of a national literacy crisis and the need for a competitive workforce, however, have resulted in the development of new programs across the country, many of which provide literacy and language training for nonnative English speakers. This digest focuses on the reasons for initiating workplace programs; types and essential features of programs; importance of conducting a needs assessment in order to determine appropriate curricula, materials, and teaching approaches; ways to design programs, construct curricula, and choose materials; and learner assessment. (VWL) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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By Janet Isserlis, International Institute of Rhode Island

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National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education

Workplace Literacy Programs for Nonnative English Speakers

by Janet Isserlis, International Institute of Rhode Island

Workplace-based educational programs are not new. Recent perceptions of a national literacy crisis and the need for a competitive workforce, however, have resulted in the development of new programs across the country, many of which provide literacy and language training for nonnative English speakers.

Reasons for Initiating Workplace Programs

The increasing need in the service industry for competent workers with literacy skills in English, combined with uncertain economic times, has resulted in more limited work opportunities for many nonnative speakers of English and more complex demands on those who are employed. Because of the growing numbers of nonnative English speakers in the U. S. workforce and their educational needs, some companies are beginning to provide training in literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills on the job (Johnston & Packer, 1987).

Workplace-based programs differ from traditional classroom-based literacy programs with a workplace component. They take place at the work site or at a location designated by the site, in response to needs identified by staff at the site—top level management, personnel officers, union representatives, or line workers. Employers' stated need for their employees' education is often related to specific skills, and expectations and stakes are often high. Those initiating the program often expect significant changes in the workplace; participating workers see education as an advancement opportunity on and off the job.

Those designing workplace-based programs face an additional challenge because they must take into account not only the dynamics of the workplace itself but also the literacy needs expressed by the learners, their employers, and union representatives. Often the interests of these groups conflict. At the same time, workplace-based programs have powerful potential for promoting learning. Workers who would not attend a night class in another location have their education brought to them. Education can be tailored to the needs and interests of the workers and discussion of job-specific literacy needs can provide a starting place for addressing literacy needs beyond the workplace as well.

Types and Essential Features of Programs

Wrigley (personal communication, August 1990) suggests three models for workplace literacy: *workplace-specific* (which focuses on language and literacy skills needed for specific jobs at a specific site), *workplace-general* (which focuses on general employment skills such as seeking clarification, complaining about unfair treatment, or organizing a committee, or on issues such as cross-cultural communication), and *workplace clusters* (where a number of jobs or vocations are clustered together according to the functions or skills they have in common.) Programs for nonnative English speaking workers tend to be both workplace-specific and workplace-general; depending on the needs of a company and its learners, workplace-specific instruction often consists of one or more units within a workplace-general curriculum.

Pelavin Associates (1991) has identified four major components of successful workplace programs: 1) systematic analysis of on-the-job literacy requirements; 2) active ongoing involvement by workers in determining the types of tasks they must perform and the literacy levels necessary; 3) active involvement by project partners (employers, unions, and teachers) in planning, designing, and operating classes; and 4) development of instructional materials related to literacy skills actually required on the job.

The design and implementation of an effective program include the components described below.

Needs Assessment

Before appropriate curricula, materials, and teaching approaches for a particular workplace program can be determined, a needs assessment must be conducted in cooperation with key company and worker representatives. Because the needs assessment involves learning about the total ecology of the work site from multiple perspectives, an ethnographic approach is most effective (see. Castaldi, 1991). Extended visits to the workplace—to production lines, to break and eating areas, and to office spaces—allow direct observation of activities to augment and clarify information provided by workers and employers in meetings and interviews. By speaking not only to management and personnel representatives but also to union representatives, potential learners, and key workers with whom the learners interact, the person conducting the needs assessment learns about the workings of the company and the needs of workers from a variety of perspectives, gleaning answers to questions such as the following:

- What jobs are performed? What skills are required for those jobs?
- What skills do workers have? What skills do they still need and want?
- What problems do workers experience in performing their jobs and moving to new jobs?
- Who holds the positions of power in the company, and who are their subordinates? Who makes decisions about hiring, job allocation, training, and other company policies?
- Why is the site considering an education program for its employees? Where did the idea originate, and what was the route it followed through the organizational hierarchy?
- Who determined that there was a language or literacy problem, and with whom is the problem presumed to lie?
- How will learners be recruited? Will attendance be mandatory or optional? Will a stipend be given upon completion of the program? What are the consequences of non-completion of the program?
- What are the workers' educational aspirations, and how do they participate in planning the program?
- What are the language, literacy, and cultural issues to be addressed?
- Who will measure progress in the program? How? What is at stake if a certain literacy level is not attained by the program's end?

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Program Design, Curricula, and Materials

The needs assessment feeds directly into the design of the program. Mrowicki and Lynch (1991), for example, use grids and graphs to chart uses of language and literacy and potential literacy and communication problems in the workplace, and then construct appropriate curricula. Añorve (1989) bases his program design on impressionistic and descriptive observations and formal and informal interactions with employers and employees.

Workplace literacy programs are moving away from conceiving of education as remediation of learner weaknesses and toward emphasizing and building on the skills and strengths that workers already have. Eastern Michigan University's Academy, one example of an effective research-based, learner-centered adult literacy project, cites three principles basic to its approach: "Learners' strengths are recognized and built on, teachers and learners collaborate as equal partners, and the environment has a significant impact upon teaching" (Soifer, Young & Irwin, 1989, p. 66). Academy staff pay attention to the diverse prior educational experiences of learners and attempt to undo the "years of working in a very directed, repetitive situation [that have] only reinforced their low self-esteem and sense of powerlessness" (p. 66).

Some workplace literacy programs are also moving away from the idea that they should prepare learners for specific jobs, believing instead that workers should "develop...the critical understanding necessary to apply knowledge to an evolving and continuously changing environment" and have the tools necessary to cope with that environment. These tools include "the ability to think, reason, question, and to search out facts" (Pandey, 1989, p. 6).

The best workplace literacy programs, in this growing view, are not those designed and carried out by outside researchers or top-level management. Instead, learners themselves are involved in formulating and implementing the program. In some instances, course content is not even fully determined until the course is actually underway and the instructor has come to know the learners. Learners continue to participate in developing the curriculum and content throughout the course.

A critical aspect of program design is defining, clarifying, and at times overcoming the different expectations that managers, supervisors, union representatives, and workers have for workplace education. For example, employers may want workers to gain specific skills as a result of attending workplace classes, while workers may want to develop more general literacy and language skills for use beyond the workplace. Bean (1990) argues that employers need to be helped to broaden their understanding of the kinds of training that are needed. Sarmiento & Kay (1990) likewise argue for the need to reconcile workers' employment and personal literacy needs with those of the employer.

Employers *and* learners need to realize the time it takes to acquire and build on literacy skills. Workplace literacy is a long-term and ongoing process. Successful programs run for several modules or semesters and promote teacher/learner collaboration in deciding how long the learner will continue (see Pharness, 1991).

Some programs use curricula, training manuals, or guidelines developed by a company, and adapt these materials to the needs of their learners. Others develop instructional plans with learners, integrating employers' stated needs (for example, "workers need to fill in work order forms more carefully") with learners' stated needs. Soifer et al. (1989) stress the need for authentic, challenging, non-threatening materials that include printed materials used on the job such as work orders, pay stubs, and handbooks.

Learner Assessment

Effective learner assessment is an important part of a workplace literacy program, because the results can have serious consequences in terms of employment options. While assessment has traditionally involved standardized pre- and post-testing (using tests such as the BEST [Center for Applied Linguistics, 1984] or other in-house or site-specific tests), many programs are moving to other, more qualitative means of assessment such as portfolios, periodic observations with focused checklists, or interviews with learners and supervisors (Lytle & Wolfe, 1989). Programs preparing learners for licensing or other credentials must follow state or nationally developed testing procedures in addition to their own assessments.

Conclusion

Given the enormous potential for workplace learning, employers, unions, teachers, researchers, and policy makers need to work together to develop, implement, and study effective programs. Programs need to focus on long-term processes rather than quick-fix solutions; involve teachers and students in all aspects of design, implementation, and assessment; identify and build on the strengths that learners bring to instruction; and expand the focus of instruction so it does not simply develop specific skills but also increases individuals' options as workers and as citizens.

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